



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, December 24, 2006
The Fourth Sunday of Advent

A Service of Nine Lessons & Carols
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Robert H. Stafford
on
Luke 1:39-56

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A SERMON FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Today's Gospel, which concludes the four Sunday Advent season, is Luke's beautiful account of what is known as the Visitation; a pregnant Mary goes to the house of her kinsfolk Zacharias and Elizabeth (1.40). Elizabeth is also pregnant. So, immediately, we notice we have two pregnancy stories paralleling each other this morning; that of Jesus and that of John the Baptist.

I am going to be brief this morning, [no three points, no summary, no conclusion of three things to do. You get off easy, because Santa is coming to town!] But, it is important to note that there is also a third pregnancy story we are intended to see in this morning's account. And, a Jewish reader of Luke's Gospel late in the last decade of the first century, when it was written, would quickly recall it. And, that is the ancient story of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18.11ff). It shapes the way we read and understand the Visitation.

Zacharias and Elizabeth are a retelling and recasting of the Abraham and Sarah story: in each instance, a woman beyond the age of natural child-bearing conceives by the grace of God *through human means*. The issue produced is a leader of the People Israel: Isaac, in the case of Abraham and Sarah; and, John the Baptist, in the example of Elizabeth and Zacharias. At this point and with this in mind, we need to be aware that we are now in the world of Jewish story telling, where mythology and teaching prevail in a construct of religious fiction. This is not the world of documentary history and verbatim reportage of fact. So what is real is hidden in the words of the story. Luke is operating very much in this Jewish tradition. He was not an eyewitness to what he is writing, some sixty years after the fact. His purpose is theological instruction, and that is not intended as biographical literalism. What is true and what is actual, literal fact are therefore different. So let's explore this difference.

Luke, as I mentioned, writes his Gospel in the ninth decade of the first century. Like the other Evangelists/Gospel authors, Luke is making a specific theological statement about Jesus, as we see it is made today, in a portion of what is called, the Lucan birth narrative. Luke is saying, Isaac and John the Baptist have miraculous births; each has an heroic destiny of singular importance in the history of Israel; *but each also has a human father*. Isaac and John are therefore mortal. Note the difference with Mary, says Luke: her pregnancy is by Divine fatherhood, the Holy Spirit, voiced by Elizabeth when she says, "...Blessed art thou

amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb” (Lu 1.42). Therefore, Jesus, unlike Isaac and John the Baptist, is different. He is greater. Human, he is in Luke’s understanding, at birth also divine, and therefore unlike any one who has come before him. He, too, shall fulfill a unique role in the history of God’s people, as savior/redeemer/messiah. Like Isaac and the Baptist, sacrifice will play a part in his story, even though he will be revealed as the final and perfect offering. In other words, a common thread in the three paralleling stories is that in each of the three pregnancy accounts, the Covenant/relationship between God and His People is about to undergo change/renewal/recreation. Something old is ending. Something new is beginning. This applies to us.

What about the other Gospels you say? Matthew is in close agreement with Luke and written about the same time; the virginity of Mary is proclaimed, and the divinity of Christ by Divine patronage is established at conception. In Mark the divinity of Jesus appears to happen at his Baptism (1.9-11), and in John, Jesus is the pre-existing Logos or Word of God, forever divine, now revealed in the *Word made flesh* (1.14) at the Incarnation. And, Paul, not a Gospel writer, but, obviously, a writer of theological significance, sees the divinity of Christ at the cross and resurrection (Rom 1.3-4).

When is God present in Jesus? I am saying there is some debate about that in our sacred Scripture. Despite the differences of authorship and intent, each of the aforementioned writers of Scripture is telling the truth about what they perceive to be *the presence of the Divine* in the life of this particular man, Jesus, in history. So, let’s read today’s Gospel not as history, not as documentary and literal fact, but as a deliberately constructed story about the presence and experience of God in the life and witness of the believer; in other words, a theology in the Jewish tradition about an eternal/unchanging truth in the lives of God’s People. This theology applies to us.

Several things now become immediately evident about this experience and truth. Let’s identify a few of them. They’re important. They apply to us.

First of all, the presence and experience of God is always mystery. And, with all mysteries, no words or descriptions can fully capture the truth of that experience. Words can only point to truth but never explain or contain it fully. I am saying, Luke, this morning, is painting for us a picture of the mystery of God, pointing us to the truth about the God who always surpasses human understanding, whose presence is blessedness. This God is Absolute and Uncontrollable, the transcendent God of love (not the God of anger and vengeance and fear).

Secondly, the mystery of the presence and experience of this God who is love, calls us out of our life and more and more into the wonder of the Divine life. God’s call or intervention summons us to live and act in faith, a faith where impossible things become possible. Luke, this morning, is giving us the examples of Sarah, of Elizabeth, and more importantly Mary; flesh and blood women who tell us what it means to turn one’s will and one’s life over to the care of God. Each of these three women, in their surrender to the will of God, discovers that life is now hid with God in a plan, a future God will unfold in the midst of the people, places, things, and events of the life and history of God’s People. Each of these mothers will know sorrow, which is the cost of faith and love itself, the personal grief that is the price of surrender.

And, thirdly, with the presence and experience of God, or with the divine intervention into each human story, comes wonder and rejoicing, the fullness of a gladsome heart and spirit. Luke, in this morning’s Gospel, is telling us that with surrender to God comes our fullest identity and happiness, the discovery of who we are and whose we are. Our future, therefore, is to walk with God in hope, because God has the final word on human history, not man.

And, finally, as a result of the presence and experience of surrender to the love of God, one is never the same. One is transformed, never deformed. Luke is telling us that Mary, like Eve, is the mother of a new creation. In other words, in our dying to self, in our surrender to the grace of God, God will bring forth something greater, more enduring than what we have lost. And, in today's Gospel that is what is termed the Kingdom of Heaven. John announces it. Jesus is the Kingdom come.

These four things apply to us. They are essential elements of the messianic Advent experience.

Now, I believe that each of us here today has some understanding and grounding in the presence and experience of the mystery of God in life, this kingdom come and messianic hope and realization, although we don't call it that. We may term it an awakening, a turning point, a revelation, a numinous experience (depth psychologists). Whatever we call it...whenever/where ever it may have happened...we can probably remember with clarity details about it; things like the date, and what we were doing, and what happened, and how we felt. Some people refer to this as being "born again." Whatever one calls it, our words will never agree or capture it accurately, it is an experience in new and renew-ing life that is received purely as gift, because we cannot make or will it to happen. Today's Gospel is such an account, using all the poetry, history, and Jewish story-telling magic, the *midrash*, as it is known, Luke can muster to teach us a truth about the ways of God amongst humankind. It is a truth that applies to us.

That Jesus is divine is a truth I can accept. When, specifically, that occurred, is not essential to me. About this, there will disagreement amongst even us! Yet, for those with some experience of the mystical presence of God in their life, that is to say, each and all of us here, today, there will be similarity to the pattern of Sarah, Elizabeth and Mary that I earlier set forth, a pattern that Luke outlines in the words of today's Gospel, a pattern that proclaims that God is near, intimately and lovingly involved in each and every human life, and that God's kingdom and final reign are at last coming amongst us, as promised to Abraham and his seed forever (*c.f.*, Lu 1.55). We live in the midst of Good News!

This faith is set forth by Luke on the lips of Mary, the God Bearer, with the proclamation of Mary's song, *Magnificat*; a song of hope, an expression of faith created by Luke to tell of the purity of the Mother of God's heart, and the rejoicing of the human spirit in the fullness and eternal life of God, our soul's joyous beginning and end. *Magnificat*, Mary's song, applies to us: it is our song as well as that of the Blessed Mother; the gladsome hymn of the faithful, that long line of men and women who have come to believe in the mercy and goodness of God, a God now amongst us and for us, who tells us that we should live no longer in fear and violence but in hope and peace, a God in whom and from whom we should expect great mercy!

To you this last Advent Sunday, God's peace and hope - put away all fear and discord. Expect great things. Christ is coming amongst us now! Let us greet him this Christmas in thanksgiving, *Magnificat*!